Hoxie N. Fairchild

Religious Perspectives of College Teaching in English Literature

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In English Literature

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Hoxie N. Fairchild
Professor of English, Hunter College

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PREFACE TO THE SERIES OF ESSAYS

Three years ago Professor George F. Thomas of Princeton University, in a letter to The Edward W. Hazen Foundation, urged the need for careful studies by natural scientists, social scientists, and humanistic scholars concerning the religious issues, implications and responsibilities involved in the teaching of their respective disciplines. This pamphlet is part of a series instituted by The Edward W. Hazen Foundation for the purpose of carrying Professor Thomas' suggestion into the sphere of fruitful inquiry and discussion. Under the sponsorship of The Foundation, the undersigned committee has enlisted the aid of distinguished scholars deeply interested in the relations between religion and higher education. Each of these scholars will discuss the problem in its specific pertinence to his own field of learning, his own conception of his intellectual and spiritual responsibilities to his students, to the institution which he serves, and to society in general. He will address himself primarily to fellow-teachers in his field, secondarily to students and to interested members of the educated public.

The committee responsible for the survey wishes to steer a course between two opposite dangers; that of a theological vagueness which would produce nothing but noncommital generalities, and that of a dogmatism which would alienate all but a small number of readers. The views of the authors of these essays may vary from liberal to orthodox interpretations of religion. Throughout this diversity, however, runs a common denominator which is shared by the authors and by the members of the committee. Religion is not nature-worship, or man-worship, or science-worship. It is not the totality of human value. Although it is metaphysical, ethical, and humanitarian, it cannot be equated with metaphysics, or ethics, or humanitarianism. Religion is man's quest for communion with an ultimate spiritual reality completely independent of human desires and imaginings. Religion apprehends this Absolute Reality and Value in faith, and seeks to give concrete embodiment to the ineffable in creed, cult, and conduct. The creative power of the universe is not an intellectual abstraction but an objective entity, a Divine Being. Although God infinitely transcends our human nature and understanding, He most potently reveals Himself to those who conceive of Him in personal terms. Thus symbolized, He becomes

for us not merely Cosmic Mind, but Creator, Judge and Redeemer of mankind.

Within this broad but positive consensus the authors of these essays will exercise complete freedom in expressing their personal views. As regards the relevance of religion for higher education there is also general agreement among those associated with this survey. The cleavage which divides intellectual from spiritual life is probably the most ominous defect of modern civilization. "High religion and intellectual enterprise belong together," says Professor Robert L. Calhoun. "Each gains from close association with the other. The two in conjunction, but neither one by itself, can move with hope toward more effective conquest of the chaos that again and again threatens to engulf human living. That way lies whatever chance we may have for a more humane world."

In his essay *Colleges, Faculties and Religion,* appraising consultations with more than fifty faculties, Professor Albert C. Outler reports that "Education is by way of being reformed with little or no regard for the possible contribution of religion to its reformation. For a very tangled skein of reasons, it has come to pass that, in the name of tolerance and the democratic spirit, American educators (whatever their private beliefs and convictions) have in fact suppressed the consideration of the problems of the religious interpretation of reality and human existence in the educational process." He sees, however, evidence that religion will become increasingly influential in American higher education if it can receive "a fair hearing in the open forum of American academic discussion . . . . Where this is done, there is usually a vigorous and generally favorable reaction from both faculty and students."

To obtain such a "fair hearing" from a large academic audience is the purpose of these essays. Even in these days of "general education," however, the modern scholar remains a specialist. He is likely to be less interested in the general problem of the place of religion in higher education than in the specific problem of how religion pertains to the teaching of his particular subject. This more specialized aspect of the question deserves more careful investigation than it has hitherto received. At present, therefore, these essays are being published as separate pamphlets so that each may appeal directly to those concerned with the discipline which it discusses.

It is hoped, however, that the project may prove fruitful enough to justify later publication in a single volume or perhaps in three shorter books devoted respectively to the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities.

HOXIE N. FAIRCHILD, Chairman
BRUCE M. BIGELOW
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EDMUND W. SINNOTT
GEORGE F. THOMAS
ROBERT ULICH

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

HOXIE N. FAIRCHILD

I.

This essay will discuss the part which religion may legitimately play in the teaching of English literature in colleges and universities. It is addressed primarily to my fellow-teachers and to those who are preparing to enter our profession, but undergraduates and members of the general public who wish to overhear a little academic shoptalk on a theme of more than academic importance are heartily welcome.

My remarks apply to non-denominational institutions both public and private. In the teaching of religion as a separate academic discipline, most privately-endowed colleges are freer from restrictions than most tax-supported ones, though there are too many exceptions in both groups to permit a rigid dichotomy. But as regards the treatment of religion in English courses, the individual teacher is probably no more restricted in a public than in a private college, provided the institution is a decent specimen of its kind. The special advantages and disadvantages of colleges committed to a particular religious position will not be examined, but the enquiry would pertain to "remote-control" denominational colleges which impose no doctrinal uniformity upon faculty or students.

Treatment of the subject will be focussed mainly upon the teaching of English (not excluding American) literature in the advanced undergraduate courses usually elected by Juniors and Seniors, but the general principles involved would be about equally applicable to the Sophomore Survey and even to the sort of Freshman English which teaches composition through the study of literature. At the other extreme, graduate courses intended to fill gaps left by undergraduate education need not be excluded, but students who have reached the level of specialized research are here regarded as junior colleagues rather than as objects of instruction. I believe also that teachers of any of the modern European literatures could easily adapt the fundamental ideas of this essay to the material of their fields.

Our own discipline cannot be discussed in complete isolation from the liberal arts curriculum as a whole. Both within and with-

out academic walls, American higher education is accused of having aggravated, rather than corrected, the aimless, fragmentary, centrifugal character of modern intellectual life. In a shamefaced endeavor to expiate the sin of specialization, a reaction toward breadth and inclusiveness is at work. "Integration" has become the educator's shibboleth; orientation courses and interdepartmental areas are the order of the day.

The new movement is not wholly untinged by the great American fallacy that any crisis in civilization can be surmounted by substituting new machinery for old. What society has a right to expect from institutions of higher learning is a perennial crop of graduates who possess some rational conception of what it means to be a man. Teachers have failed to satisfy this demand not because their courses have been too broad or too narrow, but because they have so persistently dodged the fundamental issues of human life.

It would be absurd to advocate the indoctrination of all students with a single official philosophy. The necessary consensus does not exist, and even if it did exist it should not be imposed arbitrarily. The college should be a community of inquirers—some called students, some called teachers—each of whom is striving to arrive at a philosophy. What the individual discovers may be very new or very old; it may be congenial or repugnant to the majority of his fellows. The far-away goal is unity, but it must be sought in and through the diversity which now actually exists. The quest entails historical investigation and critical evaluation, in an atmosphere of complete freedom, candor, and disinterestedness, of all the great normative hypotheses now available for thinking men.

No one will deny that religion has been the supreme integrator of intellectual and emotional experience, or that the subsidence of religious faith and the consequent chasm between intellectual and spiritual life are largely responsible for the predicament of modern man. Those who hold that it has become desirable or necessary to do without religion must at least be prepared to describe what it is they are abandoning and what they propose to substitute for it. At present there is a marked revival of religion among members of the intellectual class. Whether this is a retreat from reason or a reassertion of the possibility of reason is a debatable question. By all means, then, let it be debated. Certainly our

students are seeking, in larger numbers and more urgently than for many years, some rational basis for interpreting human existence in other than merely mechanical terms. If the final aim of all disciplines is to contribute to the development of a philosophy, the bearing of religious facts and problems upon those disciplines must be recognized as vitally important for higher education.

II.

The *immediate* pertinence of religion, however, varies with the work of different academic departments. What of our own discipline in this connection? The teaching of English literature on the college level has two main objectives: (1) ability to criticize works of literary art; (2) knowledge of the history of literature as man's expression of response to his environment in successive stages of culture. Fortunately this essay need not grapple with the disputed question as to which of these purposes is the more important. In my opinion neither of them can be achieved without paying considerable attention to the other, though in any course either the critical or the historical approach may properly be emphasized in accordance with the interests and the abilities of the instructor. On the one hand, the historical teacher will become submerged in non-literary considerations unless he constantly reminds himself that his subject is the history of an *art*. On the other hand, literary criticism requires historical imagination, which in turn depends upon historical knowledge. The teacher of literature must remember, furthermore, that his discipline is not an autonomous and isolated activity, but one of the chief unifying factors in liberal education. To study the work of art as a reflection of many different aspects of the age in which it was produced is not only a prerequisite for appreciating its non-temporal uniqueness but a valuable means of giving the student a sense of the connectedness of knowledge. Hence historical considerations which in extra-academic criticism might be secondary though never negligible may assume primary importance in the college teaching of English literature.

But no matter whether the individual teacher's approach be aesthetic or historical he must recognize the importance of religion as a factor in the author's choice of subject-matter, his intellectual and emotional response to the subject, his background of allusion,

his imagery and style. One may also observe analogies between poetic and religious experience even in works not ostensibly concerned with religion. For poetry, like religion, apprehends reality through the entire man—sensuous, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual—integrated in a creative act. In essential respects, too, poetic form is comparable to forms of worship in its struggle to achieve equilibrium between passion and pattern. Coleridge's description of metre as "more than usual emotion under more than usual control" applies equally to religious ceremonial.

When we say that we are discussing a poet's "philosophy," what we are usually discussing is his religion. Every serious work of literature is directly or indirectly an expression of the writer's personal religious experience. Essentially religious, therefore, is the reader's reconstruction of the creative process within himself. Despite the Abbé Brémond's well-known contention, the religious implications of poetry, both for writer and reader, are sacramental rather than mystical—not the concrete made ineffable, but the ineffable made concrete.

We must add that the author's religious experience, though never identical with that of anyone else, is never merely personal. Both his experience and the language in which he expresses it are strongly conditioned by religious traditions which he shares with other men. Whatever loftier results may be expected from the study of literature can hardly be attained by students who do not understand what the author is saying. It is not, of course, necessary to know everything that he knows. But to be wholly ignorant of matters which are vitally important for the content and style of the work—still worse, to have erroneous or prejudiced notions concerning such matters—is assuredly something of a handicap. The teacher can hardly get through a single class period without being reminded how deeply English literature is saturated in the language and thought of the Scriptures and in theological ideas, ecclesiastical history, liturgical imagery, the lives and opinions of religious leaders, the technical terminology and *realia* of religious thinking and living.

Let us ask an imaginary English major a few questions pertinent both to religion and to the field in which he has chosen to specialize. What parallels between Old Testament history and English history are involved in Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*? Tell

the story of Susanna and the Elders. What is a "Job's comforter," a "doubting Thomas," a "Magdalene"? What are the connotations of "the voice of the turtle," "barren fig-tree," "went by on the other side"? What are the "two massy keys" of St. Peter in *Lycidas?* Explain Wordsworth's line, "Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year," and the titles of Swinburne's *Super Flumina Babylonis,* Ruskin's *Unto This Last,* Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza.* List, without "editorializing," the chief doctrinal differences between Roman Catholicism and Calvinistic Protestantism. Define "predestination," "transubstantiation," "puritanism," "deism," "theism," "pantheism," "atonement," "schoolmen," "Dissenter," "Puseyite," "Higher Criticism," "ritual," "agnostic," "Papal Infallibility." Account for Chaucer's treatment of the Prioress, Monk, Friar, Parson, and Summoner respectively. What does he mean by a "Loller"? Does his criticism of ecclesiastical abuses establish him as a precursor of the Protestant Reformation? Discuss the interdependence of theology and politics in Spenser's *Faerie Queene.* Wherein does Crashaw represent the Counter-Reformation? What does Donne mean by "The new philosophy puts all in doubt"? Is there anything curious about the fact that the main theme of *Paradise Regained* is not the Crucifixion and Resurrection, but the Temptation in the Wilderness? To what extent is the *Essay on Man* consistent with Pope's Catholicism? Show how the Evangelical Revival is reflected in the poems of Cowper, and how the conflict between "Auld Licht" and "New Licht" helps to motivate Burns's satires. In Browning's *Christmas-Eve,* why is infidelity represented by a Goettingen professor, and why may we suppose that his name is Strauss? Why does George Eliot display all the moral urgency, but none of the religious beliefs, of a Puritan? Explain Hopkins' line, "And you unhouse and house the Lord," in relation to the Catholic liturgy. To what seventeenth-century religious community does T. S. Eliot allude in *Little Gidding?*

One could expand the quiz endlessly, but these questions would be sufficient to remind us, if any reminder were necessary, that the advanced student of English literature needs to know a good deal about religion in general and Christianity in particular. This fact exists quite independently of what we may happen to believe or disbelieve. Religious knowledge may be meaningless in our private lives, but it is important for us as teachers of literature.

With rare exceptions, our students enter college knowing nothing about the Bible and less than nothing about normative religious books such as *The Imitation of Christ* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. They are usually ignorant of the fundamental Christian doctrines, and they suppose that "theology" is an exact synonym for "bigotry." They are unaware of the fact that the Christian Church embraces a philosophy, a history, a sociology, a psychology, and a literature, all of which have been profoundly influential in the shaping of Western Civilization. Their religion, when they possess any at all, is likely to be some vestigial remnant of nineteenth-century sentimentalism. It seems never to have occurred to them that precise thinking in matters of religion is either possible or desirable. These generalizations must be qualified as regards Roman Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, Orthodox Jews, and a considerable number of well-informed Protestants. But too many members of these groups turn out to be glib little bigots who rattle off the proper formulas without understanding them.

By the time they graduate, some students have acquired a modicum of religious knowledge from courses in the Bible, History of Religion, Comparative Religion, History of Christian Thought, and the like. Teachers of English should welcome the lightening of their burdens which is promised by the growing readiness of educational administrators to encourage the study of religion as an independent humanistic discipline. For many years to come, however, the total registration for courses in religion will probably remain smaller than for courses in English. At most institutions, a definite requirement in religion would raise difficulties, while one year of English is a practically universal and two years a not very uncommon prescription. Excluding the small Department of Religion when it exists at all, and the not much larger Department of Philosophy when it offers instruction in religion, English is probably the department for which religious knowledge is most important. This by no means implies that the teacher of English literature should assume responsibility for teaching religion as a subject in itself. It does imply, however, that he must still rely largely on his own efforts in giving his students such religious knowledge as is necessary for their comprehension of literature.

It may be presumptuous to ask whether the teacher of English is always fully equipped for this task; but some professors, to judge

from their books and articles, must be telling their classes some astonishing things. Whether those who possess adequate religious knowledge sufficiently emphasize its importance is a still more dubious question. In most cases, naturally enough, religious backgrounds are treated more amply and zestfully by believers than by unbelievers; but one knows agnostics who discuss the religious thought of periods and individual authors fully, expertly, and with meticulous fairness. They give religious knowledge an emphasis proportionate not to their own opinions but to the interests of the writers whom they interpret. This is the spirit of the genuine scholar. If it were universal among us, more of our English majors would discover that religion is an essential factor in the history of literature and in the creative process.

III.

It is not enough to say that tradition and environment have given the author religious materials with which the student should possess some acquaintance. What of the author's *response* to those materials as a man and an artist? Inseparable from the total meaning of his work is a religious experience in which intellectual concepts and emotional states are interwoven. In the classroom, furthermore, this experience must be described and discussed by teachers and students who have religious ideas, beliefs, and feelings of their own. If the study of literature aimed only at collecting ponderable facts and discussing their causal relationships it would be merely an inferior imitation of natural science. But ours is a value-subject, or what might more cynically be termed an opinion-subject: it concerns itself with higher and lower degrees of technical skill, imaginative power, and intellectual validity.

At this point teachers who have espoused the cause of the "new criticism" may urge that only aesthetic values should be considered in studying a work of literature, and that the reader's agreement or disagreement with the writer's thought is totally irrelevant for criticism. But if it is true that the thought-content of a work cannot be isolated from its form, it is equally true—if not a little truer—that the form cannot be isolated from the thought-content. From Homer to T. S. Eliot, every great literary artist has desired to speak truth to men. The current tendency to ignore this fact

is no less excessive for being a natural reaction against the overt didacticism of the Victorians. Professor Bush represents the necessary counter-reaction when he writes:

> The common reader might go so far as to think that poetry deals with life, that for the serious poet life embraces morality and religion, and that it seems very strange for a serious critic to retreat into technical problems. One might ask how many of the world's great critics have done so. However valuable the processes and results of the new criticism, for some readers its preoccupation with technique, its aloof intellectuality, its fear of emotion and action, its avoidance of moral values, its dislike of "impure" poetry (which includes much of the greatest poetry we have), all this suggests the dangers of a timid aestheticism. . . . Technical aesthetic criticism is of course very important, but if it becomes a circumscribed end in itself, it is the equivalent of the scientist's escape from life into the laboratory. . . . Poetry is not read, any more than it is written, with the aesthetic intelligence only, and I think the new criticism denies and evades some of its chief responsibilities. The critics, some of whom are also poets, have bemoaned the failure of belief, the loss of traditional values, the excessive nihilism of the scientific positivists, but they themselves have been doing all they could to create a moral vacuum.[1]

In short a work of literature says something, and the reader must come to grips with what it says. Criticism is talk about literature, and literature is talk about the whole of life—the thoughts, feelings, and actions of human beings. It is studied in our colleges by young men and women who are trying to form lives of their own by discovering their personal centres. Not only expository and argumentative writings but novels, plays, and poems teem with ideas—suggested through action and metaphor when not directly expressed—concerning religion, metaphysics, ethics, history, science, psychology, social relations of every sort. Young people in search of a philosophy want to see ideas at work in forms of life to which their own natures can actually or imaginatively be related. Hence the special importance of creative literature as a means of drawing ideas from many other subjects in the curriculum, blending them as they are blended in the stream of life, and vividly displaying

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[1] Douglas Bush, "The New Criticism: Some Old-Fashioned Queries," *PMLA*, LXIV (Supplement, Part 2), 20-21.

them in a setting of human personality and experience. Ideas as expressed in imaginative literature therefore have a peculiar potency. They possess the superior teachability of the concrete. They mingle reason and emotion in a way which reflects, and which in turn powerfully stimulates, the natural workings of the mind. They gain persuasiveness from beauty of form, sharpness of image, the power of the illuminating phrase. Since ideas appear in literature not as abstract propositions but as human responses to specific stimuli they strongly impress the minds of young people who are trying to formulate responses of their own. Literature displays not merely pictures of life, but the efforts of exceptionally perceptive, intelligent, and articulate persons to make sense of those pictures. Thus it helps the student to think through vicarious living and to live through vicarious thinking.

In my opinion, then, the teacher of English who does not encourage discussion of the ideas expressed or implied in books is depriving the study of literature of precisely those elements which constitute its principal value for a liberal education. But as a matter of fact the students, if they deserve to be in college at all, will indulge in such discussion whether the instructor encourages it or not. This recalcitrancy need not be lamented by the teacher who desires to emphasize the formal beauty of the work. Students are usually more willing to proceed from content to form than from form to content. Once they are convinced that the author is saying something relevant to their lives they will gladly analyze the skill with which he says it. They will, of course, frequently need to be reminded that they are supposed to be talking about Milton and not about themselves. Nevertheless their discovery of what they think of Milton's thought is an important part of their education, and in order to make this discovery they will need to organize and express their own notions about "the ways of God to man." After a little free discursive philosophizing they can be led back to *Paradise Lost* with a better chance of understanding the masterpiece both as a separate work of art and as a factor in the history of culture.

The religious ideas and insights in which literature abounds deserve discussion no less than the author's opinions on other subjects. A large proportion of any class will be eager to discuss them, for most of our religious illiterates are groping toward some

sort of spiritual reliance in a world of unprecedented confusion and insecurity. So strong is their curiosity about religion that the teacher who performs his duty of giving them religious *facts* will inevitably become involved in the discussion of religious *ideas*. He may, for example, tell the class that Swinburne's *Hymn of Man* was suggested by the Oecumenical Council of 1870, and that the concluding line, "Glory to Man in the highest, for Man is the master of things," reflects, either directly or through Mazzini, the influence of Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity. These facts are worth knowing, for they help us to experience the poem in the way Swinburne wrote it—as a response to a specific stimulus. But if the teacher and his students have any life in them, they will soon find themselves considering something more interesting and important: namely, the question of the *truth or falsity* of Swinburne's deification of man in this and other poems. This question is germane to the study of literature if, as I believe, it is part of the critic's business to ask whether Swinburne was wise or foolish in these matters.

In examining such questions, of course, the inevitable subjectivity of all value-judgments comes into play. It does not follow, however, that discussion of an author's religious thought is a waste of time. Rigorous application of the same scepticism to the humanities, to the social sciences, and even to some areas of the laboratory sciences would brand two-thirds of the curriculum with the stigma of futility. If talk about religion is unprofitable, what justification can be found for talk about aesthetic judgments? Surely we cannot *prove* that this poem by Keats is superior to that poem by Longfellow.

In my opinion all valid intellectual discourse assumes, first, that absolute objective truth exists; secondly, that the relation between that truth and our own mental impressions can never be determined with certitude in this mortal life; thirdly, that the life of reason is each man's struggle to move away from crude solipsistic subjectivity toward a personally refracted but not wilfully self-centered apprehension of the unknown suprapersonal truth. The success of these individual gropings cannot be estimated by any individual mind, but that some of our guesses come closer to the mark than others is at least a fair human guess. Man is condemned to live pragmatically in an absolutistic universe, judging the validity

of ideas mainly in terms of their survival value. His endeavor to be intelligent about religion rests on the same basis as his endeavor to be intelligent about anything else. Hence the attempt to evaluate a writer's religious thought is not futile unless the whole of intellectual life is futile. The certainty of incertitude merely warns us against the futility of dogmatism. What one may expect from discussion of a religious idea is not proof or disproof, but comprehension of its meaning, knowledge of its background, presuppositions, implications, and historical consequences, along with the opportunity to clarify one's notions through comparison with the notions of others. Even though no generally acceptable findings are achieved, the free clash of opinion may help the student to discover his philosophy of life, and that is what liberal education is for.

IV.

In these discussions the teacher of English literature should himself play an active part. Students' talk about religion is liable to be ignorant, aimless, inconsistent, sentimental, and prejudiced. Applied to such topics, a chaotically "democratic" classroom procedure may have the undemocratic effect of aggravating the bewilderment of already bewildered minds and hurting the sensibilities of students who hold minority opinions. In the investigation of a religious as of any other problem, the teacher's duty is to *teach*. His relation to his students should, of course, be that of leadership in a common inquiry. He should think *with* the class, not *at* them. But since he is a better-equipped, more experienced inquirer than they, his students will look to him for knowledge and perhaps even for a little wisdom. Hence the term "discussion" includes the ideas of the teacher himself, whether woven informally into the give-and-take of the classroom or expressed in more systematic disquisitions. Granting that the professor knows how to talk like a human being and that the student knows how to listen actively rather than passively, there is still much to be said for the lecture as a pedagogical device.

If there exists a teacher who has formed no opinions about the subject which he teaches, he may charitably be ignored in these pages. Of course when we say that every good teacher has ideas of his own we do not mean that they are absolutely unique: even in

the twentieth century, intellectual life is not quite so chaotic as that. Usually his position is a more or less individualized version of the doctrine of some established academic party. Such groupings are not necessarily the result of stereotyped thinking. A thoroughly independent and original mind may conclude that some already existent theory, just as it stands, is superior to other theories. Once this conclusion has been reached, however, there is danger that loyalty to it may load the dice of the scholar's subsequent thinking.

To whatever extent the individual teacher succeeds or fails in avoiding this danger, his view of the truth about a given subject will inevitably condition his selection of material and his emphasis on this or that aspect of the field. It will also influence what he says and the way in which he says it. No teacher can keep his mind, his words, and his voice so colorless as to conceal from an intelligent student his most deeply cherished opinions. Even if complete intellectual neutrality were possible it would be pedagogically disastrous. No teaching is surer to win the deserved contempt of the class than that of the instructor who pretends to have no opinions. Students like and respect the teacher who sets forth his own ideas freely and frankly, not in order to force them upon the class but in order to encourage them to form ideas of their own. Higher education can never achieve a philosophy if the faculty refuses to philosophize.

The reader may urge that the teacher's opinionatedness should be confined to his special field. But it would require a bold man to declare precisely on what topics the philosopher, the sociologist, the historian, or the literary scholar may or may not venture to express opinions. Consciously or unconsciously, the teacher's views about his own subject stem from fundamental presuppositions about the universe and human life which are not the private property of any one department. Beneath his professional theories lies his philosophy of life, of which a positive or negative attitude toward religion is an essential part. He is not only a learned specialist but a human being. Where no one can pretend to speak as an authority he may speak as a man.

Since the religious hypothesis is ultimately relevant to every subject of inquiry, there is no academic discipline in which expression of the teacher's religious opinions will not sometimes be justi-

fiable. But this applies *a fortiori* to literary studies, where the author's religion forms an essential part of the subject-matter. The teacher of English must often lead his students in their discussion of religious topics, and this he cannot do effectively or honestly without revealing what he himself thinks.

V.

The teacher's opinions need not be favorable to any particular creed or even to religion in the broadest, haziest sense. Here I dissociate myself most emphatically from those bigots who wish all the "godless professors" to be thrown out of their jobs or silenced by the administration. Such obscurantism has done more than anything else to create the present cleavage between intellectual and spiritual life. In the long run the position of religion in higher education will be solidified rather than weakened by encouraging both the unbelieving and the believing professor to speak their minds in complete liberty. The religious-minded teacher often has reason to complain that his sceptical colleagues are ignorant, prejudiced, and crudely dogmatic in their treatment of religious questions. Unfortunately—one remembers the adage concerning pot and kettle—these faults are not monopolized by the unbelievers.

No matter how positive or negative the teacher's religious views may be, his obligations are simply those entailed by the general principles of academic freedom. All the cards should be laid on the table: the student should know his instructor's basic presuppositions and commitments just as the soldier should know that his rifle, measured against an abstract norm of mechanical accuracy, tends to shoot a little to the right or to the left. Let there be no lugging in of religious questions extraneous to the material under consideration. Our business is not to make pious Christians or stout atheists, but to impart understanding and appreciation of English literature. Opinions should be distinguished from facts and expressed without proselytizing insinuation or authoritarian bluster. Evidence should be stated fully and without distortion. Contrary views should be given a fair hearing, with honest recognition of their merits and honest criticism of their defects. When full discussion of some religious problem would lead the class too

far beyond the scope of the course, interested students should be shown how they may investigate the problem for themselves.

A course in literature governed by these principles will provide as good a lesson in "character-building" as secular education can be expected to furnish. If we taught literature with the primary purpose of making young people more religious or democratic or "global," our discipline would become one huge amiable corruption. Let us rather give them, day by day, the example of a free and honest mind at work among books. In the present state of the world, of course, the teacher who is interested in his students as human beings will do what he can to direct the discussion of books toward normative principles which, whether religious or non-religious, seem to offer at least a tentative solution of the predicament of modern man. As professors of a discipline which deals with man's intellectual and emotional responses to life's ultimate problems, we hardly do our full duty when we plunge the student into the depths of the contemporary chaos and then just leave him there with a smiling, "Some say this and some say that. Think it out for yourself." Nevertheless if the teacher sincerely believes that nothing is left for man but despair it is his right and his duty to say so. For this also is a philosophy.

The number of aggressively unbelieving professors of English is small in proportion to the general state of academic opinion. Mere indifference—refusal to think about the author's thought—is much more common among us than active irreligion. The occasional combination of indifference with some enthusiasm for the aesthetic trappings of traditional Christianity provides a recognizable type. But what especially characterizes our guild is an amorphous religiosity arising from the notion that literature—especially of course poetry—is itself a superior kind of substitute-religion. It is not merely from self-interest that so many teachers of English are active in the "save the humanities" movement: they sincerely believe that the spiritual reintegration of our bewildered young men and women will be furthered by studying those subjects which most fully display the joy and dignity of being human.

My own position in this matter may seem paradoxical: I am an anti-humanistic humanist. Unquestionably the wisdom and beauty of great literature exerts a civilizing and even a morally elevating effect upon some students, though by no means upon all. Never-

theless I fear that a revival of the humanities without a revival of the superhumanities would merely entail a repetition of the tragedy of modern history—the rise and collapse of the gospel of human self-sufficiency. One thinks of the little boy who, having seen his father tumble downstairs, ecstatically cries, "Do it again, Daddy! Do it again!"

Some professors of English support the "save the humanities" campaign from crypto-Christian rather than from purely humanistic motives, hoping that students who read Blake and Browning will acquire a little grace without knowing it. I respect their intentions but question the wisdom of their strategy. One of Screwtape's favorite tricks is to encourage emotional experiences which enable one to feel religious without believing in a religion. Religion will produce an edifying humanism, but humanistic studies in themselves will never produce a valid religion. The result of these efforts is likely to be a cult which employs literature as a means of convincing men that they are independently strong, wise, good, and creative. This is the illusion which arose in the Renaissance, inflated itself into a pseudo-religion in the nineteenth century, and burst in the twentieth.

But although for me the notion that Shelley was a profound spiritual seer is ultimately far more detrimental to religion than honest atheism, I cordially recognize the right of my colleagues to say what they please about such matters. All I demand is that they grant me the same privilege. My basic contention is that all good teaching of literature arises from a philosophy and points toward a philosophy. Whatever that philosophy may be—naturalistic, humanistic, or religious—it is the right and the duty of the teacher to set it forth with no restrictions other than those imposed by the accepted standards of sound scholarship and intellectual probity.

VI.

But all this is rather too abstract. Let us imagine a teacher who "professes" both English literature and Christianity and ask how these two professions may be combined without disloyalty to either and with advantage to both. Inevitably our hypothetical professor will bear a rather close resemblance to the author of this essay. Hence the illustrative examples will be drawn mainly from the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the fields to which most of my teaching and my private studies have been devoted.

The Christian professor will naturally give due emphasis to those matters of religious knowledge which, as we have reminded ourselves, are often essential for an understanding of the work. Scriptural influence on subject-matter, style, and imagery will be pointed out; pertinent theological concepts and terms will be explained. The class will consider religious trends and movements as conditioning not merely the opinions but the feeling-tone and expression of various writers: Pope and Deism; Richardson and sentimentalized Puritanism; Shelley and romanticized Neoplatonism; Tennyson and Victorian Broad Churchmanship; Browning and liberalized Nonconformity; Kingsley and Christian Socialism; D. G. Rossetti and the ritualistic phase of the Catholic Revival. These and similar relationships will be used not merely in studying particular writers and their works, but in tracing the general history of the human spirit as reflected in literature.

The Christian teacher will be tempted to overemphasize such knowledge, just as teachers with different interests will be tempted to overemphasize prosody, or biography, or social history. He may avoid lopsidedness by trying to give religion all the importance, but no more than the importance, which it possessed for the writer under consideration. This principle cannot be applied with complete objectivity, but it provides a control within which the Christian teacher, like any other teacher, remains free to set up his chosen frame of reference. He will not, of course, stultify the usefulness of his approach by isolating religion from the philosophical, scientific, and sociological trends which blend with it to form the intellectual matrix of English literature. On the contrary, he will devote considerable attention to the politico-ecclesiastical ferment of the Queen Anne period as reflected in the writings of Defoe, Swift, and Steele; to the aesthetic implications of Shaftesbury's doctrine of the "moral sense"; to the respective influences of German transcendental idealism and of Comtian positivism upon various nineteenth-century writers; to the impact of evolutionary science upon the beliefs and disbeliefs of Tennyson, Arnold, Clough, and Meredith.

Interpretation of such topics as those mentioned in the preceding paragraph involves not only the religious views of the writers who

are being studied but those of the teacher and the class. Precisely in proportion to the definiteness of his religious commitments, the teacher will endeavor to break the traditional association, which for many of his students will seem axiomatic, between orthodoxy and intolerance. He will welcome any chance to show that valuable religious insights are not the exclusive property of Christianity, still less of any particular interpretation of the Christian faith. Robinson Crusoe, that stout Presbyterian, learns much from Man Friday. Newman first discovered the fundamentals of Christian dogma in the writings of eighteenth-century Evangelicals. Furthermore the Christian professor will accept the obligation to show how largely the spiritual shortcomings of organized Christianity are to blame for the deviation of many writers from the historic faith. If he prefers the poetic fruits of the Catholic Revival to those of Broad Churchism, he should preserve a just critical balance by recognizing the morbid escapism which often tinges the former and the sincere struggle of the latter to reconcile traditional religion with modern thought.

In classroom discussion of any religious idea, the Christian professor will carefully avoid offending the susceptibilities of Jewish students. To deny or ignore the important differences between Judaism and Christianity is to falsify both religions, but especially in the present state of the world the unifying elements of the Judaeo-Christian tradition deserve strong emphasis. Let us show how closely the atmosphere of *The Cotter's Saturday Night* resembles that of a Jewish Sabbath, and that in *Michael* Wordsworth discards the neoclassical pastoralism of the eighteenth century for the pastoralism of the Old Testament. No belief which is precious to any student, no matter how absurd it may seem to the instructor, should be attacked with anger or mockery. Students who are indifferent or hostile to supernaturalistic religion of any sort should be treated with a friendly courtesy which will make it impossible for them to suppose that they must pretend to agree with the professor's views in order to pass the course. By observing him they may gradually discover that it is possible for a learned, intelligent, and honest man to be a Christian; but what they infer from that discovery is a private matter which has no bearing upon the teaching of literature. If the student of his own volition chooses to visit the professor's study for a man-to-man discussion of his personal

religious difficulties, he must expect to be dealt with in a way which goes beyond the formality of the classroom teacher-pupil relationship. The professor should not, however, unfairly exploit such occasions by trying to force his views upon a bewildered, suggestible boy. It will be better to remind the student of the values inherent in the religious tradition of his own family background. If he has not merely drifted away from this tradition but rejected it after serious thought, the existence of some other solution for his problem may quietly be indicated without any evangelistic urgency. Perhaps he will read a few books or investigate a mode of worship which is unfamiliar to him.

In teaching any period of English literature, the Christian will often find it easier to refute a fallacy than to enforce a truth. Students like polemics, but they detest preachment and they loathe unction. The surest way of making them reject a religious idea is to urge them to accept it. Approaching a poem of deep spiritual insight, the teacher will do well to remember that the poet has already said what the teacher himself would wish to say much better than he could say it. A great thought beautifully expressed seldom needs to be underscored: it can be trusted to exert its own power. The competent reading of a poem to the class will often be more convincing than any overt attempt to make the students agree with its thought. Sometimes, however, it will be necessary to point out the specifically Christian elements in the words which have moved them. They will probably interpret George Herbert's *Love bade me enter* in terms of modern sentimentalism unless they are shown that it is a poem about the Eucharist. This is not proselytizing: it is simply making sure that the student shares the poet's experience. A legitimate remedy for spiritual tone-deafness is to contrast non-Christian and Christian treatments of the same theme—the concluding passages of Epistle I of Pope's *Essay on Man* and of Dr. Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes,* or Wordsworth's *The world is too much with us* and Hopkins' *God's Grandeur.*

VII.

Although the culture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England remains nominally Christian, the most representative creative literature of the period diverges markedly from traditional

Christianity. The poetry of the Catholic Revival provides an interesting exception, but one can hardly call it a part of the dominant historical trend which leads from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. The attempt to describe and evaluate these deviations from the Christian norm will confront the teacher with some difficult problems.

In the critical study of particular works the Christian professor cannot assume any fixed positive correlation between orthodoxy and literary merit. The devout Tupper is unbearable; the blasphemous Swinburne is a very good though hardly a great poet. Pope's deistic *Essay on Man* is better poetry than his *Messiah;* Wordsworth's pantheistic *Tintern Abbey* than his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets.* But the teacher may be openly sceptical of the opposite assumption that the "greatness" of a poem varies with the poet's ability to spout misty aspirations which not only the rational unbeliever but the rational believer must repudiate as noble nonsense. It is fair to suggest that Tennyson's *The Ancient Sage* does not triumphantly soar above "man-made creeds," but merely expresses the modern hankering to feel religious without making any religious commitments. People do not begin to debilitate their minds with valedictorian gush about gleams, goals, ideals, torches, horizons, and quests until they have ceased to believe in Christianity and have almost, though perhaps not quite, ceased to believe in God. The sentimental pantheon created by beginning words like Nature, Love, Beauty, and Man with a capital letter is spurious not only for religion but for art. To the subsidence of positive religious belief may be ascribed much of the vagueness and softness, the verbosity and didacticism which contemporary critics object to in nineteenth-century poetry. *The Hound of Heaven* is a better poem than *Merlin and the Gleam.* But so also, the Christian teacher must freely grant, are *Dover Beach* and *The City of Dreadful Night.* Not only passionate belief, but passionate sorrow over the loss of faith and passionate unbelief are poetically stimulating because they produce the concentrated vitality of utterance and the sharpness of image which arise from centripetal rather than centrifugal emotion. Granting the possession of literary talent, genuine religion is favorable to poetry. The same is true of genuine irreligion so long as it retains vivid images of what it denies. But the substitute-religions—the amorphous naturalisms and humanisms and

idealisms which spawn from the decay of Christianity—resist by their very nature the creation of a satisfying aesthetic form. A supremely gifted artist may surmount this handicap, but only with great difficulty.

Such critical considerations cannot be isolated from the question of the inherent truth or falsity of the writer's assertions. Here the free expression of personal opinion, both by the instructor and by the members of the class, provides a valuable means of relating the study of the work to the general aims of liberal education. In supporting his own views, however, the teacher should be very careful not to force upon his students the *a priori* assumption that a writer's position is false because it departs from this or that Christian doctrine. The divergency should be noted as an historical fact, not as a moral error. The only authority to be invoked is that of natural reason, of personal experience, and above all of history. The agreement of Christianity with these criteria is by no means the obligatory starting-point of the argument, but a conclusion which may be arrived at inductively. The teacher should make it clear to his students that he is a Christian because he holds certain opinions, not that he holds certain opinions because he is a Christian.

Tintern Abbey, for example, expresses in noble language an authentic spiritual experience. That this experience is basically un-Christian is an objective fact important for an understanding of romantic ideology, but the poet's thought is not to be condemned because pantheism is a heresy. The instructor may, however, draw from other poems of Wordsworth and from the works of his contemporaries evidence for asserting that when the romantic poet appears to be worshipping the divinity of nature he is mainly worshipping the exploits of his own imaginative power. Hence if religion is anything more than a man-worship which is a cloak for self-worship, the Wordsworth of 1798 is not so religious as he sounds. It is fair to note that he himself soon began to realize the inadequacy of the position on which his best poetry is grounded. And looking forward into the nineteenth century the teacher may ask his students to observe how utterly the romantic nature-cult was smashed by an evolutionary concept of nature which left the foundations of non-romantic Christian supernaturalism completely unshaken.

As the foregoing example indicates, the limitations of an idea will often be most fruitfully exposed not by frontal attack, but by showing what finally emerges from it. As expressed in *Sartor Resartus,* Carlyle's conception of sense-impressions as the garment of supersensuous spiritual reality seems favorable to religion in general and by no means hostile to Christianity in particular. We scent danger, however, when in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* the masterful man emerges as he who can reveal to weaker spirits the eternal truths enshrouded in the phenomenal "clothes." My readers need not be reminded how, step by step through successive works, Carlyle the seer betrays himself as a forerunner of Fascism.

The Christian professor may legitimately suggest that Carlyle's abandonment of his ancestral religion for German transcendentalism is a factor in his spiritual tragedy. He may, however, find it necessary to add that Carlyle's Calvinistic background included implications of individualism, subjectivity, and energy-worship which prepared him only too well for reception of the post-Kantian gospel. For if the teacher believes that certain areas of Christianity have proved less resistant to decay than others, it will sometimes be his duty to say so. Emerson's "No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature" is radically anti-Christian. It represents a cult of human self-sufficiency which would have been no less repugnant to Calvin than to Aquinas. Nevertheless this collapse of Christian objectivity into romantic solipsism is much more obviously an outgrowth of the Protestant than of the Catholic tradition, which of course has its own very different snares of authoritarianism and mechanical formalism. Emerson's career in itself epitomizes the shift from Puritanism to Unitarianism and from Unitarianism to romantic transcendentalism. This fact exists quite independently of the teacher's personal religious commitments, although his desire to *express* the fact will certainly vary with those commitments. The point may be stated in precisely the same tone as would be used in explaining the qualities of Pope's couplets, and whatever fundamental implications it may suggest had better be left to the student.

Similarly many utterances of Victorian writers cannot be discussed profitably without observing their relationship to a general trend moving from Evangelicalism or Noncomformity to a vague theism and thence to nothing at all. Browning's career exhibits the

first two phases of this movement: contrast *Christmas-Eve* and *La Saisiaz.* The class may wish to discuss the central thought of *The Statue and the Bust*:

> Let a man contend to the uttermost
> For his life's set prize, be what it will.

These lines embody the courage, the vitality, the omnivorous lack of discrimination, the hearty optimistic muddle-headedness which characterize both the art and the "philosophy" of this poet. Intelligent students will see that some of the prizes for which man strives are worthier of pursuit than others. The teacher need not underscore the alertness of Christianity to the moral danger of Browning's position; but he should feel free to say that it becomes natural to glorify mere activity for its own sake in a period when men grow increasingly uncertain as to the objectivity of religious truth and hence increasingly uncertain as to the aim of their striving. Perhaps Tennyson's *Ulysses* would be an even finer poem if the courageous old wanderer had some faint idea of where he wanted to go. The class may well consider the ultimate fruits of this widespread gospel of "I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way," this "inspirational" notion that it is somehow nobler to miss a bus than to catch it. That such fallacies are utterly opposed to Christian realism may be profitably surprising to students who have come to identify Christianity with *Schwärmerei.* Objections of this kind may be raised without blaming the writer for saying precisely what he would be expected to say at a particular stage in the history of ideas. With rare exceptions, poets do not make the thought of their time: they simply respond to it with especial sensitiveness. It would be ungrateful to scold at men who reveal so clearly and movingly the spiritual struggles of the age in which they lived.

Some readers of this essay will feel that such teaching is unnecessarily negative and astringent. They will assert that the highest office of the Christian teacher is not to encourage habits of spiritual discrimination but to bring inspiring thoughts to the attention of the student. Speaking now wholly for myself, I admire and envy, though I cannot fully understand, those religious-minded colleagues who are able to treat their material in a bracing and optimistic spirit. Unfortunately the facts as I see them compel me to regard the history of the literary expression of religious thought mainly

as a study in spiritual pathology. Perhaps the accurate description of a disease too clearly indicates the remedy to be a source of despair. Inevitably, however, the story which I must tell my students, up to the point where it leaves off unfinished in our own day, is not a cheerful one. Looking back upon the past in the year 1950, I cannot describe English literature from the sixteenth century onward as the record of an ever-increasing enlightenment. The story includes much beauty, much high aspiration, many broken recollections of primal truth and therefore many glimpses of hope for the future. Nevertheless its central theme is the inflation and collapse of a human pride which has either forsaken Christianity or transformed it into a delusive caricature of the historic faith. To trace the course of this tragedy, showing the relation of individual authors and their works to the development of the plot, must be my task as a Christian teacher and scholar.

I need hardly say, however, that this theme does not constantly occupy the foreground of my instruction. A course in English literature devoted exclusively to religious considerations would be absurdly disproportionate. There are many hours when an observer who visited my classroom would not infer that I believed anything at all except that Keats was a great master of fresh-minted metaphor. One must also remember that the student who is exposed to the sort of teaching which I have described will also be exposed to quite different points of view championed by other professors of English and by members of other departments. The consequent confusion at least eliminates the danger of illegitimate indoctrination. The student will discover what any scholar must grant—that in order to understand English literature it is necessary to understand the Christian religion and what has happened to it through the centuries. He may also, of course, learn that Christianity is relevant to his own spiritual needs. That possibility does not trouble my conscience. I have the right to apply a Christian philosophy of life to the interpretation of English literature; the student has the right to discover through the study of literature what Christianity means, and to choose it if he wants it.

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